



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

For release December 16, 1994

Georgia Parham 202-208-5634

SERVICE WITHDRAWS PROPOSAL TO LIST ALABAMA STURGEON AS ENDANGERED SPECIES; SEARCH FOR STURGEON CONTINUES

Recent information from the Army Corps of Engineers indicates that listing the Alabama sturgeon as an endangered species would not impact barging and other activities in the Alabama and Tombigbee rivers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Mollie Beattie said today.

Citing lack of information that the sturgeon still exists, the Fish and Wildlife Service officially withdrew its proposal to list the Alabama sturgeon as an endangered species in a notice published in the December 15, 1994, Federal Register. However, Beattie said the agency will continue to look for the rare fish.

"Although I believe it is not appropriate to list the Alabama sturgeon at this time, we will continue surveys to locate any remaining sturgeon," Beattie said. "If the species is eventually found and listed as endangered, it is clear such a listing would not have the economic impacts that some people projected."

Beattie said the Service and the Army Corps of Engineers, the agency responsible for dredging activities that keep the rivers open to commercial barge and other traffic, have agreed that maintenance of shipping channels would not affect any surviving sturgeon. In a letter to the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Corps concluded that its channel maintenance dredging program on the Alabama and Tombigbee rivers will have "no effect" on any surviving Alabama sturgeon and that maintenance activities need not be eliminated, modified, or altered to protect the Alabama sturgeon.

According to the Service, Alabama sturgeon are not thought to be associated with areas subject to dredging. Habitat needed by Alabama sturgeon to feed and spawn, it is believed, includes areas in swifter currents where riverbeds are relatively undisturbed and sediments do not normally settle. In contrast, dredging is usually necessary where currents are slower.

Beattie also pointed out that several other species in the river system, including the Gulf sturgeon and a number of freshwater mussels, have been listed as endangered or threatened for a number of years without adverse effects to shipping, gravel mining, and other economic activities on the Alabama and Tombigbee river systems.

The Alabama sturgeon is known only from the Mobile River system of Alabama and Mississippi. Historically, this sturgeon was found in the Mobile, Tensas, Alabama, Tombigbee, Black Warrior, Cahaba, Tallapoosa, and Coosa rivers. However, the only confirmed record of the Alabama sturgeon since 1985 is from the free-flowing portion of the Alabama River in Clark and Monroe counties, Alabama. The last known specimen was caught in a gillnet by Service biologists in December 1993 but died soon after in a hatchery pond.

The Service proposed to list the sturgeon as an endangered species in June 1993. The final decision on the listing, due in June 1994, was deferred for 6 months as the Service conducted additional field surveys in an attempt to locate the fish.

During the public comment period on the proposal to list the sturgeon, concern was expressed also about the scientific classification of the Alabama sturgeon as a distinct species. The Service, in responding to those comments in its notice withdrawing the proposal, reiterated its position that the Alabama sturgeon represents a distinct species. In addition, a study report recently prepared for the Service and the Corps found significant differences between the Alabama sturgeon and the two other related sturgeons, the pallid and the shovelnose.

The Service's notice withdrawing its listing of the Alabama sturgeon appears in the December 15, 1994, Federal Register.